DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 894 JC 010 063

TITLE	Reasons for Not Returning to NVCC: Telephone Survey and Focus Group Findings.
INSTITUTION	Northern Virginia Community Coll., Annandale.
REPORT NO	RR-18-00
PUB DATE	2000-09-00
NOTE	23p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Persistence; Community Colleges; Focus Groups; *School Holding Power; *Student Attrition; Student Surveys; Telephone Surveys; Two Year Colleges; Withdrawal (Education)
IDENTIFIERS	*Northern Virginia Community College

ABSTRACT

Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) conducted a telephone survey and two focus groups to determine why students who enrolled for the first time during fall 1999 did not return for the following spring 2000 semester. The main reasons that 557 telephone survey respondents gave were that approximately: (1) 17% had either transferred to another institution or had achieved their academic goals; (2) 62% cited "life circumstances," which included financial reasons, family reasons, conflicts with employment, and new employment opportunities; and (3) 12% had academic problems or were dissatisfied with NVCC services or instruction. The focus groups provided additional information about factors contributing to not returning. Competing demands on their time, energy, and personal finances, lack of money or time, scheduling or transportation difficulties, and uncertainty about which classes to take were mentioned as factors contributing to their decisions not to return. Some participants indicated that more information or access to counselors might have helped them stay in school. Many planned to return in the future. NVCC might help students by communicating more clearly about registration processes, financial aid, and counseling services; extending counseling office and registration hours; offering online registration; and offering more evening classes. Survey instrument is included. (PGS)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 447 894

REASONS FOR NOT RETURNING TO NVCC: TELEPHONE SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Gabriel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Research Report No. 18-00

Office of Institutional Research
Northern Virginia Community College

September 2000

IR010063

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

The purpose of the Office of Institutional Research is to conduct analytical studies and provide information in support of institutional planning, policy formulation and decision making. In addition, the office provides leadership and support in research related activities to members of the NVCC community engaged in planning and evaluating the institution's success in accomplishing its mission.

DIRECTOR

Dr. George E. Gabriel

STAFF MEMBERS

Julie Bettenberg

Margret Chang

Johan Dennett

Louise Herzfeld

Linda Hoffman

Nadezhda Osmanova

4001 Wakefield Chapel Road
Annandale, VA 22003-3796
(703) 323-3129
http://www.nv.cc.va.us/oir

REASONS FOR NOT RETURNING TO NVCC: TELEPHONE SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Table of Contents

Page

Abstract 1

Introduction 2

Section 1: Reasons for Not Returning to NVCC: Telephone Survey Findings 3

A. Achieving Educational Objectives as Reasons for Not Returning 3
Transferred to Another School 3
Achieved Educational Goal 3

B. Life Circumstances as Reasons for Not Returning 4
Financial Reasons 4
Family Reasons 5
Personal Reasons 6
Conflict with Employment 6
Employment Opportunities 7
Relocation or Distance 7
Transportation Problems 7
Health Reasons 8
Other Reasons for Not Returning 8

C. NVCC Experiences as Reasons for Not Returning 8
Academic Reasons 8
Unavailability of Courses or Programs 9
Academic Counseling 9
Instructors and Courses 10
College Personnel 10
Facilities and Services 11

Section 2: Reasons for Not Returning to NVCC: Focus Group Findings 12

Overall Experiences at NVCC 12
Academic Experiences at NVCC 13
Most Satisfactory Experiences at NVCC 13
Least Satisfactory Experiences at NVCC 13
Factors Contributing to Decisions to Attend NVCC 14
Factors Contributing to Decisions Not to Return to NVCC 14
Assisting Student Enrollment 14

Summary 16

REASONS FOR NOT RETURNING TO NVCC: TELEPHONE SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Abstract

A major finding from the Non-Returning Student Survey showed that approximately 17% of the respondents did not return because they had either transferred to another institution or had achieved their academic goals.

In other cases, however, respondents faced obstacles in returning to the College. Approximately 62% of the respondents did not return to NVCC due to "life circumstances". The most frequently stated "life circumstances", which influenced respondents' decisions not to return, included a) financial reasons, b) family reasons, c) conflicts with employment, and d) new employment opportunities. Many of these respondents faced demands on their time, energy, and personal finances that competed with continuing their education. When faced with these competing forces, many of the respondents opted to temporarily stop their education. Several respondents stated their various responsibilities hardly left them time to attend class, let alone study. When students' decisions not to return to NVCC were prompted by life circumstances, the College could do relatively little to influence their choices.

However, some respondents indicated "personal reasons" for not returning to NVCC such as a lack of connection to the College or feeling "invisible" on campus. The College can address these reasons that students stated for not returning to the institution. Efforts to integrate all students both academically and socially at the College can be a part of retention strategies.

Many of the respondents, who stated "life circumstances" for not returning, indicated they planned to return to NVCC in the future. The challenge to NVCC will be to expand its efforts in assisting students who must balance family and/or work obligations with school. In addition, the College may look for ways in which financial aid can be used as a tool in assisting student retention.

A smaller proportion of respondents (approximately 12%) did not return to NVCC because they had academic problems or were dissatisfied with NVCC services or instruction. Unlike in the case of life circumstances, the College may be in a better position to address these issues. Examining these reasons may help the College identify areas for improvement that will benefit students.[1]

[1] Approximately 9% of the survey respondents did not return to NVCC due to numerous other reasons. These reasons are not discussed in this report.

REASONS FOR NOT RETURNING TO NVCC: TELEPHONE SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Introduction

In order to gain a better understanding of student retention at Northern Virginia Community College, the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) conducted a study of non-returning students. The study pertained to individuals who had enrolled at NVCC for the first time during the fall 1999 semester and who did not return for the following semester (spring 2000). In order to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data on student retention, a telephone survey of non-returning students was conducted and two focus groups of non-returning students were convened.

The Non-Returning Student surveys were conducted in order to determine the reasons why students do not return to NVCC. The survey respondents were first asked to indicate their reason(s) for not returning to NVCC. Respondents were then asked to give their single most important reason for not returning. Subsequent questions in the survey asked respondents whether their decision was temporary in nature, whether they planned to return to NVCC at a future date, and if they planned to attend another college. Respondents were also asked whether there was anything that the College might have done to help them continue their studies.[2]

In addition to the Non-Returning Student Survey, focus groups were held at both the Annandale Campus and Alexandria Campus to discuss reasons why students did not return to NVCC. Focus group participants were asked to characterize their overall and academic experiences at NVCC, aspects of their NVCC experience they found most and least satisfactory, and why they did not return in the spring semester. Participants were also asked what the College could have done to help them continue.

When the telephone surveys were conducted, interviewers observed patterns in respondents' reasons for not returning to NVCC. These reasons were summarized under different categories. Since many of the reasons were very similar to each other, some reflecting general patterns were selected as examples. Although these examples were from specific students they are not anecdotes, but a reflection of the opinions of many students.

This report, summarizing the findings from the telephone surveys and focus groups, is divided into two sections. Section 1 presents qualitative data gathered from telephone responses to the Non-Returning Student Survey. There were 557 respondents from all five campuses to the telephone survey. The data presents the primary reasons why respondents did not return to the College.[3] Section 2 presents qualitative data gathered from two focus groups of former NVCC students.

---

[2] A copy of the survey instrument is attached at the end of the report.

[3] A detailed explanation of the percentages and quantitative data presented in Section 1 can be found in the OIR Report, "Non-Returning Student Survey Report". All percentages included in this report are based on both the mail and telephone surveys.

Section 1: Reasons for Not Returning to NVCC: Telephone Survey Findings

Section 1 presents the main reasons that telephone survey respondents indicated for not returning to NVCC. The reasons for not returning were grouped into three main areas: a) achieving educational objectives, b) life circumstances that made it difficult for the respondent to return, and c) NVCC experiences influencing the respondent's decision not to return.

A. Achieving Educational Objectives as Reasons for Not Returning

Several respondents to the telephone survey indicated their primary reason for not returning was because they had transferred to another college or university. Similarly, another group of respondents stated they did not return to NVCC because they had achieved their educational objective. These students represent a "positive attrition" because they either obtained their goals or have continued their education.

Transferred to Another School

Approximately 9% of the Non-Returning Student Survey respondents indicated their primary reason for not returning to NVCC was because they transferred to another school.[4] The majority of the respondents (or household members answering for them) stated they had transferred to Virginia Tech, George Mason University or other four-year colleges in Virginia.[5] Several respondents indicated their acceptance at four-year colleges had been contingent upon earning credits at NVCC (or another college) and achieving a certain grade point average. Comments about NVCC from transfer students or their parents were positive in nature. A parent whose son transferred to Mary Washington stated her son "tells anyone who's interested" that he was "extremely pleased" with NVCC. Another parent praised an NVCC counselor's efficient handling of her son's last minute decision to transfer to an out-of-state university. Her son, like some other transfer students, planned to take at least one course at NVCC during the summer semester. According to another respondent's parent, Virginia Tech's high rating of NVCC and its provision of a list of NVCC courses that would transfer influenced her son's decision to choose NVCC. She said he was very satisfied with his choice. Respondents were not asked why they transferred, however, many comments indicated that respondents enrolled at NVCC with the intent to transfer.

Achieved Educational Goal

Approximately 8% of the survey respondents indicated they did not return to NVCC because they had achieved their educational goal. The most frequently indicated response was that respondents enrolled in courses to meet occupational requirements

[4] The percentage includes both respondents to the mail and telephone versions of the Non-Returning Student Survey.

[5] Transfer information was occasionally obtained from household members of the former NVCC student.

or to upgrade job skills. One person stated how training at NVCC enabled him to remain in his lifelong occupation after a health problem made it impossible for him to stay on the job in his previous capacity. New employment opportunities opened up for a respondent who completed driver instructor's training at NVCC. A teacher with a master's degree completed an NVCC course that helped her meet requirements for technology certification. High school students made up a group of respondents who achieved an educational goal at NVCC. Many of these respondents earned college credits in academic programs while others enrolled independently. The mother of a home schooled respondent, who took a mathematics course at NVCC said, "He couldn't have finished high school requirements without NVCC." A common suggestion from respondents in this category was for NVCC to continue offering as many courses as possible at convenient locations and times.

B. Life Circumstances as Reasons for Not Returning

In reviewing responses related to life circumstances, it can be seen that many non-returning students faced demands on their time, money, and energy that competed with their education at NVCC. It appears that personal priorities or circumstances were the determining factors in some respondents' decisions not to return to NVCC, not dissatisfaction with the College. These reasons reflect individual life circumstances or preferences that, while not within the College's control, can be taken into account by NVCC in its' design of policies and programs. Personal circumstances were the most frequently cited reasons for not returning to NVCC compared to other areas. Many of the respondents, however, who stated life circumstances as a reason for not returning to NVCC, indicated they planned to return to the College in the future.

Financial Reasons

Respondents, who cited financial reasons for not returning, most often indicated that they had to put other needs ahead of education. Many respondents also indicated they had dependents and had to give priority to the financial needs of their family. One father said, "Money-it's all about money," adding that he is saving for school but must give priority to providing for his family. Another respondent reported that despite holding two jobs, he had little money for school because he was the sole support of his growing family. A single working parent said that having to pay for both child care and education expenses put returning to school beyond her financial reach.

Other respondents, who cited financial reasons for not returning, explained that one reason they were working was to build up their bank accounts in order to return to school. Some of these respondents were newly independent, or planning on "moving out" soon and paying for their own education. As one respondent explained, she wanted to take time out from school in order to earn her own money to pay for a car, education, and housing. She believed that gaining work experience would have the added benefit of helping her to succeed in school when she returns. Some respondents stated they preferred working and saving as compared to seeking financial aid because they "didn't want to owe" for college expenses. A few respondents stated they were in low paying jobs, while other respondents said they had suffered financial setbacks due to illness,

injury, or the loss of a job. "No work, no money. No money, no school" is how one respondent described her financial dilemma.

A small group of respondents suggested the College might have helped them with financial problems. A few respondents (those who paid out-of-state tuition) said the College could have helped them by lowering tuition. Some respondents, however, said they had tried and failed to obtain financial aid, implying that the College might have better served them in their efforts. A few of the respondents stated they had applied for financial aid but did not receive an answer in time for their application. Some applicants, who were denied financial aid, said they never received a good explanation for why they did not qualify. In addition to reporting some problems with financial aid applications, some respondents strongly recommended the College make a greater effort to inform students about the types of financial aid available and how to apply for assistance.

Besides financial aid, several respondents stated other ways the College might have helped them with their financial problems. They felt NVCC should allow an extended period of time for paying tuition. One respondent stated that deferred payments would help those who don't qualify for financial aid. A single parent explained that paying tuition for the spring semester "all at once" was impossible for her, but that the paycheck she earned every two weeks would have enabled her to make regular payments throughout the semester. Different respondents had different ideas on how the payment period could be extended, but all agreed the College could have helped them by allowing deferred payments.

Family Reasons

Respondents to the telephone survey, who cited family reasons for not returning, most often explained that responsibilities prevented them from returning. "Work, children, and illness in the family" were the reasons for not returning given by one respondent, illustrating the multiple roles of many survey respondents. Several respondents stated their various responsibilities hardly left them time to attend class, let alone study. A single working mother found it "hard to settle into studying again" partly because of competing demands and partly because she had been out of school for several years. Others stated they had children or other family members to whom they needed to devote their time and energy. Although many respondents mentioned family responsibilities as a reason for not returning, only 1% of the respondents cited child care problems as a factor in their decision not to return.

Respondents who cited family reasons for not returning did not generally think there was anything the College could have done to help them return. However, some respondents offered comments indicating what had been helpful or what might help them in the future. Several were enthusiastic about courses offered at their workplace, saying that it was only through such an arrangement they could manage school, work, and family responsibilities. A small number of respondents with infants or young children said that child care on campus might have helped them continue their education. A new mother thought that offering more home study courses would afford parents the chance to continue their studies with NVCC. Some other respondents felt that taking courses through the Extended Learning Institute was their most feasible option for balancing school, work, and family responsibilities, but noted that the limited number of courses was a drawback.

Personal Reasons

Personal reasons for not returning to NVCC were often unspecified, but some respondents provided explanations. A few respondents said they just "didn't feel like" returning, didn't like going to school, or didn't want to return. Others indicated that "not being ready for college" or uncertainty about what to study was a reason for not returning. "I have no idea what I want to do," said one respondent, "it's a waste of money to go to school." Another respondent, learning that she had to complete English and other requirements before she could start work on a nursing degree, decided she would have to settle for training elsewhere to become a licensed practical nurse. Other respondents decided that they simply preferred work to college. One respondent, who said that school had "always been difficult for him," explained that he is learning more of interest to him in his job than he was in NVCC classes.

Several respondents mentioned failing to "connect" to the College. "I felt invisible," was the comment expressed by one respondent. Another respondent stated, "I just went to class and came home", while another speculated that because NVCC was a commuter school it was "hard to interact with other students." A transfer student observed that in her experience, "social life was missing" at NVCC, but she said she didn't know of anything the College could do about it. A respondent who recently moved to the U.S. cited lack of money as her main reason for not returning, then later asked why NVCC doesn't have social activities, "especially for foreign students." None of these respondents gave their lack of social contact or involvement with campus life as a primary reason for not returning. Rather the respondents mentioned it when asked whether they had any comments or suggestions for College administrators.

Conflict with Employment

Ten percent of the respondents cited conflict with employment as their main reason for not returning. Work related reasons for not returning generally fell into two categories: scheduling conflicts, and a lack of time for meeting the obligations of both work and school. Many of the respondents regarded such circumstances as temporary reasons for not returning.

One respondent, who had struggled with an "impossible schedule" during the fall semester, stated she was considering changing working hours or jobs so that she could attend school in the mornings, a better time for her to learn. A few respondents mentioned that work-related travel interfered with their desire to continue. More typically, respondents simply could not register for classes they needed because the classes were not offered at times compatible with their work schedules.

Not surprisingly, the difficulty of finding time for both school and work caused many respondents not to return. As one respondent stated, working full time, attending class, and studying outside of class was just "too much to handle." Others said their heavy workload or "burden of responsibility" on the job, their six or seven day work week, or their long hours left them too little time or energy to study. A respondent, whose employer was willing to pay his education expenses, could not enroll in the courses he wanted because he was working too many hours. Many respondents explained they chose to give priority to their jobs for now, with the idea of returning to school at a later time. Several respondents said they needed to "take a break" from doing both work and

school. One respondent said she needed to "recover" from the fall semester after working a midnight shift in order to attend school each week. Other respondents said they decided that given the demands of their job, they could not "do justice" to their studies.

Respondents, who cited work related reasons for not returning, seldom indicated there was anything the College could have done to help them continue. One respondent suggested that classes be scheduled to begin earlier in the day (6:00 a.m.) while another suggested later (8:00 p.m.). Some respondents, who worked full time or who owned businesses, had enrolled in ELI courses, but often had failed to complete them. Other respondents suggested that instructors might better accommodate working students by making more use of modern technology such as e-mail. Suggestions included having instructors make allowances for workers who face peak demand periods at their jobs or for those whose work requires travel. Based on the few comments given, however, it appears that most respondents felt that the demands placed on students by employment were not something the College could easily address.

Employment Opportunities

Starting a new job or being given increased responsibilities at work was the main reason 10% of the respondents stated for not returning to NVCC. Staff shortages at some respondents' workplaces had increased their workload, while promotions or changes in duties affected others' ability to continue school. One respondent described how changing from work on a hospital ward to an intensive care unit had increased his level of responsibility and made his work schedule less flexible. Others had joined new businesses or had gone into business for themselves and needed to focus their time on new enterprises. Some respondents had obtained jobs or joined the military with the intention of later taking advantage of education benefits offered by their new employers.

Relocation or Distance

Seven percent of the survey respondents stated the main reason for not returning to NVCC was because of distance problems or relocation. Information about respondents who moved out of the area was obtained from members of their former households. As for respondents who reported distance as a reason for not returning, most had attempted long commutes and simply decided against continuing.

Transportation Problems

Transportation problems were cited as the primary reason for not returning by 2% of the respondents. Those without cars found traveling by bus too time consuming. One respondent did not return to NVCC because it entailed a two-hour bus ride each way. Another respondent said she had to take three different buses to get to the Annandale Campus from her home. Most respondents did not think NVCC could help them solve their transportation problems, but one suggested that the College could encourage public transportation providers to offer student discounts and to improve services to students by operating shuttle buses.

Health Reasons

Approximately 3% of the survey respondents cited health issues as a reason for not returning. Based on the comments from the telephone survey, some respondents with health problems felt they received supportive treatment at NVCC while others did not. One respondent was grateful to College personnel who helped her switch enrollment to an ELI course when ill health prevented her from attending classes. Another respondent felt her instructors gave little flexibility when she missed classes due to a health problem and a death in her family. The degree of flexibility in dealing with students with health problems appeared to vary widely from one instructor to another.

Other Reasons for Not Returning

Ten percent of the respondents stated "other reasons" for not returning to NVCC. An examination of these reasons revealed that many were similar in nature to "family or personal" reasons (e.g. "not really ready," change of direction, uncertainty about what to study, needing to take time off to "figure things out"). Other reasons included not having adequate information or time to register, failing to register correctly, not paying tuition on time, deciding to go to another college (but not yet enrolled), and not having a computer for ELI courses. Travel and spending extensive time out of state or out of the country were also among the other reasons cited in this category.

C. NVCC Experiences as Reasons for Not Returning

The number of respondents who stated they did not return due to their experiences at NVCC was small. Nevertheless, the reasons deserve comparable attention because they deal with the quality of education and services at NVCC. It should be noted that the majority of the responses to questions on the telephone survey were positive. Many respondents made highly favorable comments about the College, faculty and counselors, and services. In this discussion, however, the selected comments pertain to the negative aspects of the respondents' experiences.

Academic Reasons

Approximately 3% of the respondents cited academic reasons for not returning to NVCC. The most common reason cited by respondents was difficulty keeping up with academic demands. However, a few respondents mentioned finding themselves in classes that were below their level. One respondent described the two classes she took as "just like high school." She said that she expected a higher level of coursework in college.

Additional information on academic concerns was gathered from the parents of non-returning students. Upon hearing the purpose of the survey, a few parents reported that their children had failed classes (or withdrawn to avoid failing). Two parents of learning disabled students stated their children started classes during the fall semester but were unable to complete the coursework. One parent said that a little more help from the teacher might have made a difference. In other cases, students experienced academic

difficulties that left their parents puzzled. One mother described how her son "got off to a great start" earning A's and B's, then "just lost interest" and failed all of his courses. Another parent said her son failed at NVCC, but is currently doing well in the military where he is engaged in "highly technical training."

Of the respondents who gave academic reasons for not returning, few indicated that the College might have helped them with their academic difficulties. In some cases, respondents blamed themselves for not putting forth enough effort, while others said they had never been good in school.

Unavailability of Courses or Programs

Approximately 4% of the respondents cited unavailability of courses or programs as their single most important reason for not returning. No clear pattern emerged of what classes or programs might have been most in demand. A few respondents mentioned computer classes being full or not available at a time or place they could attend. Other respondents mentioned English and ESL classes they wanted to take but the classes were closed or the class time conflicted with their schedule. In cases where respondents said programs they were interested in were not available, it was most often a matter of programs not being offered at a campus close enough to a respondent's home or job.

Academic Counseling

Approximately 1% of the respondents cited dissatisfaction with academic counseling services as their most important reason for not returning. Wrong or inadequate advice from counselors, long waiting times, short consultations, and an uncaring attitude on the part of counselors were some of the complaints stated by the respondents. A typical complaint came from a respondent who thought NVCC counselors should take more time explaining to students why it is important to take particular classes. "Take this, take that" is not enough, she said. Of particular concern to several other respondents was how to get reliable information and advice on credits that would transfer and which courses students needed to meet program requirements. One respondent said she just gave up and signed up only for English, math and STD courses because she couldn't find anyone to advise her on what else to take. Several other respondents complained about the difficulty of getting in to see a counselor, some saying they never saw a counselor because of long waits or because counselors were not available during evening hours.

Among the most critical of counseling services were respondents who were unhappy with their placement in math, ESL, or English classes. One respondent, new to the country, stated that she paid a lot of money to attend NVCC because she was not eligible for in-state tuition, only to be placed in ESL and pre-calculus classes that she disliked. Another respondent cited financial circumstances as her primary reason for not returning, but then added that placement testing put her in reading comprehension and math classes that she considered "insulting, a waste of time." Generally, respondents who were puzzled or disappointed over their math, ESL, or English placements seem to have gone along with what they were advised, but then dropped classes or felt they had

wasted their time and money. One said that if she did return to NVCC, she would go straight to a counselor if anyone put her in another "remedial" class.

Several respondents had suggestions for improving counseling services. One respondent thought College counselors should be more accessible and also questioned why counselors don't help students who are "going downhill". He suggested a "safety net" of personnel to help students who get into difficulty. Another respondent suggested the College should identify first-time students. "Find out who they are and have them come in for a meeting with a counselor after classes start, discuss how things are going," was her advice. More typically, respondents recommended that more counselors should be available during peak periods such as registration, and available during the evenings and weekends to accommodate students who cannot meet with them on weekdays.

Instructors and Courses

Few respondents cited dissatisfaction with either instructors or courses as a reason for not returning. However some respondents mentioned what they perceived as deficiencies in instructors' attitudes, teaching ability, or management of the class. One of the strongest criticisms came from a respondent who stated the instructor "played favorites" and wouldn't answer the respondent's questions or give him any help. Another respondent said one reason she didn't finish the fall semester or return was that she felt the teacher was more intimidating than helpful. A respondent who suffered health and personal problems made repeated attempts to reach her instructors after she began missing classes. Another former student claimed that the instructor was so rude and unpleasant that she didn't want to take a chance on repeating the experience. As for quality of instruction, one respondent said she did not return because she knew she would get the same instructor she had during the fall semester. She said she wanted to learn, but the instructor "just wanted to get through the book." Like some other respondents who criticized instructors, she also stated the instructor didn't seem to care about his students.

When asked if the College might do anything to help them return, some respondents stated NVCC should provide instructors who encourage, not discourage students, and who answer students' phone calls or e-mail. "Administrators should talk to students and be sure teachers are teaching the right way," according to one respondent. Another respondent stated that she thought several students had submitted critical evaluations of an instructor, yet the instructor continued to teach. "My suggestion is that administrators pay attention to what students say about instructors," she advised.

College Personnel

Less than 1% of the respondents cited dissatisfaction with College personnel as a reason for not returning. Those who expressed dissatisfaction described problems that were not resolved to their satisfaction. A mother reported her son had withdrawn from NVCC classes before reporting for military duty. According to her, not only did he not receive a refund, but instead he received "a bad grade report". A few other respondents recounted problems registering or withdrawing in which College personnel might have been more helpful. Another respondent stated he missed the deadline for a refund because he was informed too late to be reimbursed for an overpayment that he made to

the College. A home study student dropped her class when she could not reach anyone to find out how to obtain materials for the class. In reporting such problems, some respondents acknowledged that it was up to students to "learn the procedures," but that College personnel should make a greater effort to offer help to first-time students.

Facilities and Services

Less than 1% of the respondents stated dissatisfaction with College facilities as a reason for not continuing their studies at NVCC. One respondent asserted that the computer labs he used were not properly maintained, forcing him to spend lab time "debugging" computers before he could begin his assignments. Another stated he experienced "a big problem" because his e-mail to a professor failed to get through, presumably because of campus network problems. "Technical difficulties" prevented the broadcast of the first segment of a distance learning course from reaching the home of one respondent, causing her to have to travel to campus – something she had hoped to avoid by enrolling in a distance learning course.

The bookstore and parking were some of the services criticized by respondents. In the opinion of some respondents, bookstores were not open late enough, prices were too high, and required texts were not always in stock. One respondent told how he paid ninety dollars for just one book, and then found out that books would cost him even more for the spring semester. Parking services also received several criticisms. Some respondents criticized the lack of close parking, especially for night students, and the inconvenience of paid parking for those without permits. Despite complaints about these and other services at NVCC, few respondents indicated poor facilities or services as reasons for not returning.

Section 2: Reasons for Not Returning to NVCC: Focus Group Findings

In addition to conducting mail and telephone surveys, the Office of Institutional Research held focus groups at two NVCC campuses to learn the reasons why some students do not return after one semester of enrollment. The first focus group was held in March 2000, at the Alexandria Campus; the second was held in May 2000 at the Annandale Campus.

Like the respondents to the mail and telephone Non-Returning Student Surveys, participants in the focus groups were former students who had attended the College for the first time in the fall 1999 semester and had not returned for the following spring semester. Discussions were led by a focus group coordinator who guided participants in a discussion of their reasons for not returning and their experiences at NVCC.

Participants were asked the following questions in the focus groups:

- How would you characterize your overall experience at NVCC?
- How would you characterize your academic experience at NVCC?
- What aspects of your experience at NVCC did you find most satisfactory?
- What aspects of your experience at NVCC did you find least satisfactory?
- What factors contributed to your decision to attend NVCC last fall?
- What factors contributed to your decision not to return to NVCC this spring?
- What could NVCC have done to enable you to re-enroll in the spring semester?

The following summaries are based on responses from focus group participants at both campuses.

Overall Experiences at NVCC

More participants gave responses of a positive rather than negative nature when asked how they would characterize their overall experience at NVCC. Participants who expressed positive aspects of the College spoke in general terms, saying their overall experiences at NVCC were "good" or "challenging". In other cases, participants specified what they liked, such as a knowledgeable instructor, classmates of diverse backgrounds, a helpful counselor, or a class where the environment was conducive to learning.

Participants who expressed negative experiences included one who found his classes boring. Another participant considered her experience at NVCC as "nothing exceptional." One participant described her first semester at NVCC as hard, in part because she was working while attending.

In describing their overall experience at NVCC, some participants spoke about their apprehension over attending college for the first time, saying they were nervous at first or didn't know what to expect. One participant said she was concerned about attending NVCC partly because of her age, but did not find it to be a problem.

Academic Experiences at NVCC

Participants were approximately divided between those who found academics at NVCC challenging and those who did not. One participant, for example, judged his courses "not academically challenging" and another person stated courses were a review. By contrast, other participants said their courses were challenging, that they learned a lot, or that they had to put forth effort to keep up.

Some participants offered their views of instructors and teaching methods when asked to characterize their academic experience at NVCC. One participant praised an instructor whose techniques helped "make things stick." Another participant stated that professors were always available and helpful. However, other participants found their instructors lacking. One participant said the professor in one of her classes "just followed the book." Another participant said some of her professors were great, but one was so unsatisfactory that she stopped attending class for a while.

Most Satisfactory Experiences at NVCC

One of the most satisfactory aspects of participants' experiences at NVCC was the people they met, including their instructors. Helpfulness on the part of some of the people they met was also a satisfying aspect of their NVCC experience.

Students' willingness to help one another, in classes and other situations, seemed to have been especially valued by several different participants. One participant who had been out of school for a long time said other students helped her navigate registration. Another said that she appreciated being treated like other students even though she was older. Helpfulness on the part of people working at registration and effective help from a tutor were also mentioned as satisfactory aspects of participants' experience at NVCC.

Instructors who made themselves available, made classes fun, encouraged interaction, or made students think were commended by different participants. One participant, responding to the question of what aspects she found most satisfactory, stated "My professor – I still stay in contact."

Least Satisfactory Experiences at NVCC

Aspects of the participants' experiences, which were least satisfactory, pertained primarily to campus services. However, one participant described an instructor who was disrespectful to students. She said the instructor was the least satisfactory aspect of her experience at NVCC.

As for College services, two participants reported bad experiences at registration, another participant could not find information about NVCC services or extracurricular activities, and two other participants found counseling services unsatisfactory. Statements were also made about the high price of books and the low amounts paid for used books resold to the College bookstores. Parking area safety, parking availability, and enforcement of parking regulations were all stated as unsatisfactory areas by some participants. One suggestion from the discussion was that first-time students be given a "longer grace period" for complying with parking regulations.

Factors Contributing to Decisions to Attend NVCC

A variety of factors contributed to participants' decisions to attend NVCC. Some of the factors that influenced different participants included the proximity of an NVCC campus to their home, NVCC's affordability, and the availability of classes to fit work or family schedules. Hearing good things about NVCC from friends was a factor in other participants' decisions to attend the College.

Of the participants who spoke about why they enrolled at the College, some suggested they did not intend to enroll on a continuous basis. For example, one participant wanted "to try a course," another wanted "to keep busy", and a third participant enrolled to meet a work requirement. Another participant, who had deferred attending a four-year college, took a class at NVCC to help her stay in "study mode". By contrast, other participants made comments suggesting they might have wanted to continue at NVCC. One participant, for example, enrolled "to see what college was like." Another participant, a home schooled student, said that one reason he enrolled at NVCC was because he was required to attend a two-year college before gaining admittance to a four-year college.

Factors Contributing to Decisions Not to Return to NVCC

Some participants did not return to NVCC due to individual circumstances. More than one participant in each of the focus groups stated that lack of money was a factor in his or her decision not to return. Other participants stated they lacked time or found that classes were not available at a time they could take them. Lack of transportation caused one participant to postpone returning while illness prevented another. In addition, two other participants mentioned winter weather conditions as barriers to returning for the spring semester.

School related factors influenced other participants' decisions not to return. Some of the factors included uncertainty about what classes to take, fear of failing a math placement test, and not being able to take courses because they were full. Other factors, which influenced participants' decisions not to return, included lacking prerequisite courses and not being able to get needed information from counselors.

Assisting Student Enrollment

When asked what NVCC could have done to enable them to re-enroll for the spring semester, some participants indicated that more information might have helped them. Other participants stated more access to counselors would have been helpful. One participant, however, said that nothing would have helped her situation.

Specific information, which participants said would have helped them re-enroll, included information about financial aid, class schedules, classes for students with different learning styles, and placement tests. As first-time students, some participants appeared to have been frustrated over the difficulty of finding vital information regarding their education at NVCC. One participant said he would like to see "everything about the College" in one book so that he would know what to ask counselors. Another participant

said NVCC should let students know what kinds of financial aid they are qualified for. "I don't like to ask questions," he said. "I want the information to be out there."

According to their responses, extending counseling office hours might have helped some individuals. Some participants also indicated they might have benefited from more individualized attention from counselors. Another participant said that "a counselor who knows me" would help. Extending registration hours, offering online registration, and offering more evening classes were other suggestions that came up in the discussions of this questions.

Summary

This report presents findings from the Non-Returning Student Survey. The data was gathered through telephone interviews and focus groups conducted with former NVCC students. The purpose of both the survey and the focus groups was to determine the reasons why students do not return to the College. The telephone respondents to the Non-Returning Student Survey and the participants of the focus groups were all first-time students who attended NVCC during the fall 1999 semester and did not return for the following spring 2000 semester.

A positive finding from the Non-Returning Student Survey showed that approximately 17% of the respondents did not return because they had either transferred to another institution or had achieved their academic goals. This attrition rate demonstrates that the College is providing a sound education for students to further develop at four-year institutions and that the College is providing a way for individuals in the community to achieve short-term academic goals.

In other cases, however, respondents faced obstacles in returning to the College. Life circumstances accounted for approximately 62% of the reasons that respondents gave for not returning to NVCC. The most frequently stated life circumstances, which influenced respondents' decisions not to return, included financial reasons, family reasons, conflicts with employment, and new employment opportunities. Many of these respondents faced demands on their time, energy, and personal finances that competed with continuing their education. Because of their life circumstances, not because of dissatisfaction with the College, they decided not to return to NVCC for the spring semester. However, some respondents indicated "personal reasons" for not returning to the College. Many of these respondents stated they did not feel "connected" to NVCC. The College should explore ways to integrate students both academically and socially in order to increase retention.

Many of the respondents indicated they planned to return to NVCC in the future. The challenge to NVCC will be to expand its efforts in assisting students who must balance family and/or work obligations with school. In addition, the College needs to ensure that all students are aware of the types of financial aid available and how to apply for financial aid assistance.

A smaller proportion of respondents (approximately 12%) did not return because they either had academic problems or were dissatisfied with NVCC services or instruction. Although less frequently cited compared to life circumstances, these responses are important because they have to do with the quality of education at NVCC. Unlike life circumstances, some of the reasons that student do not return (academic problems, counseling, instruction, courses, financial aid difficulties, and College personnel) can be addressed by NVCC. Examining these reasons may help NVCC to identify areas for improvement that will benefit all students.[6]

Findings from the focus groups were similar to those of the telephone survey. In general, the focus group participants enjoyed their experience at NVCC and several of the participants planned to return to the College at a later date. Many of the participants'

[6] Approximately 9% of the survey respondents did not return to NVCC due to numerous other reasons. These reasons are not discussed in this report.

decisions for not enrolling in the spring semester were due to life circumstances and indecision or uncertainty about which classes to take. Findings from the focus groups suggest that NVCC should increase efforts to clearly communicate information to students. In particular, first-time students should know where to find critical information on areas such as registration processes, financial aid, and counseling services.

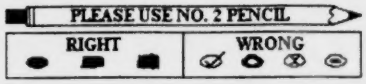
NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Office of Institutional Research

Survey of Non-Returning Students

*****CONFIDENTIAL SURVEY*****

HOW TO COMPLETE THIS SURVEY:



The Office of Institutional Research at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) is interested in learning the reason(s) why students do not return to NVCC. Your responses will help us to develop strategies and provide support services for all our students.

Your opinions and responses are valuable and will be completely confidential. Your responses will not be linked with your name in any way. To mark an answer, use a dark pencil or pen to color in the circle next to the response of your choice. Do NOT mark the answer with a check and do NOT circle it.

1. Please indicate whether any of the following were reasons for **NOT RETURNING** to Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) this semester. Mark all the letters that apply.

   a. Transferred to another school
   b. Achieved educational goal
   c. Financial reasons (lack of funds, new financial commitment, etc.)
   d. Academic reasons (classes too difficult, disappointment with my grades, etc.)
   e. Employment opportunities (new job, change of job, etc.)
   f. Conflict with employment (change in work schedule, etc.)
   g. Health reasons
   h. Family or personal reasons (too busy, etc.)
   i. Unavailability of courses/programs (courses/programs filled too quickly, etc.)
   j. Dissatisfied with course(s)
   k. Dissatisfied with instructor(s)
   l. Dissatisfied with college staff
   m. Dissatisfied with NVCC facilities (academic labs, libraries, tutorial support, etc.)
   n. Dissatisfied with academic advising or counseling
   o. Child care problem(s) (couldn't find appropriate child care, no child care on campus, etc.)
   p. Transportation problem(s) (too far from Metro, lack of reliable transportation, etc.)
   q. Relocation/distance (moved away from an NVCC campus; too far from my home, work, etc.)
   r. Other: _____

2. Which was the **SINGLE** most important reason for not returning to NVCC? (Using the reasons from Question 1, mark one of the letters.)

3. In general, how would you classify the reason(s) you selected in Question 1?
   Temporary Permanent Don't know

4. Do you think you will return to NVCC in the future?
   Yes No Maybe Don't know

5. Do you think you will attend another college in the future?
   Yes No Maybe Don't know

6. Is there anything that NVCC could have done to help you continue with your studies at NVCC?

7. Please write any comments or suggestions you have for College administrators.

For office use only:

Thank you for your time. Mail survey using the enclosed pre-paid envelope, ***no postage is required****. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact the Office of Institutional Research at (703) 323-4577.*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

COLLEGE MISSION AND GOALS

The mission of Northern Virginia Community College is to respond to the educational needs of its dynamic and diverse constituencies through an array of comprehensive programs and services that facilitate learning and workforce development in an environment of open access and lifelong educational opportunities.

To achieve this mission, the following strategic goals for 1999-2001 are established:

I. Sustain and Strengthen Academic Quality and Teaching Excellence.

II. Enhance the Quality of Services to Students.

III. Expand the Integration of Technology in Instruction and Administration.

IV. Increase Access to College Programs and Services.

V. Improve the Quality of Institutional Communication.

VI. Strengthen Programs That Help Build a World Class Workforce.

VII. Promote Responsiveness to Diversity of Students and Employees.

VIII. Strengthen and Develop Additional Linkages with Community Groups.

IX. Integrate College Planning and Facility Requirements.

X. Enhance the Overall Wellness of Our Working and Living Environments.